

## Social Media Influencers' Social Cause Communication and Perceived Authenticity

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**Introduction.** Building on their influential platforms, many social media influencers have spontaneously contributed to raising public awareness of social causes and gathering momentum for social campaigns. For example, a research survey found that 52% of young Americans participated in the Black Lives Matter movement, such as using the #BLM hashtag, after seeing an influencer advocating the movement (Feldmann, 2020). Due to influencers' impact on consumers, non-profit organizations and brands have started partnering with influencers to promote social campaigns, such as fundraising for charities (Vant Hoff, 2019).

Despite influencers' increasing role in persuading consumers about social causes, research examining their social cause communication remains scarce. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine how influencers' organic social cause communication affects consumers' reactions. As the perceived authenticity of corporate social responsibility (CSR) communication is crucial in generating consumers' positive perceptions (Pérez, 2019), it may similarly play a key role in consumers' affirmative responses to influencers. Hence, the study investigates the antecedents and outcomes of influencers' perceived social responsibility authenticity.

**Theoretical Background.** Adapting Pérez (2019) and Alhouti et al.'s (2016) definitions of CSR authenticity, we define influencers' perceived social responsibility authenticity (*perceived authenticity* hereafter) as the perception that an influencer's involvement in socially responsible actions is a genuine expression of the influencer's beliefs and behaviors based on objective information in the influencer's message. Drawing on Pérez's (2019) CSR communication authenticity framework, we propose transparency of social cause communication as an antecedent variable that enhances perceived authenticity. Transparency refers to efforts to provide all truthful, substantial, and useful information that contains objective, balanced descriptions of its activities and is open to the audience's participation and request for more information (Rawlins, 2008). Moreover, social cause fit (i.e., the congruence between a social cause topic and an influencer's domain of interest, such as fashion) may moderate the impact of transparency because a good fit sends a positive signal of authenticity and elicits consumers' positive perceptions (Alhouti et al., 2016; Kim & Lee, 2018).

Furthermore, based on CSR communication research (Kim & Lee, 2018), perceived

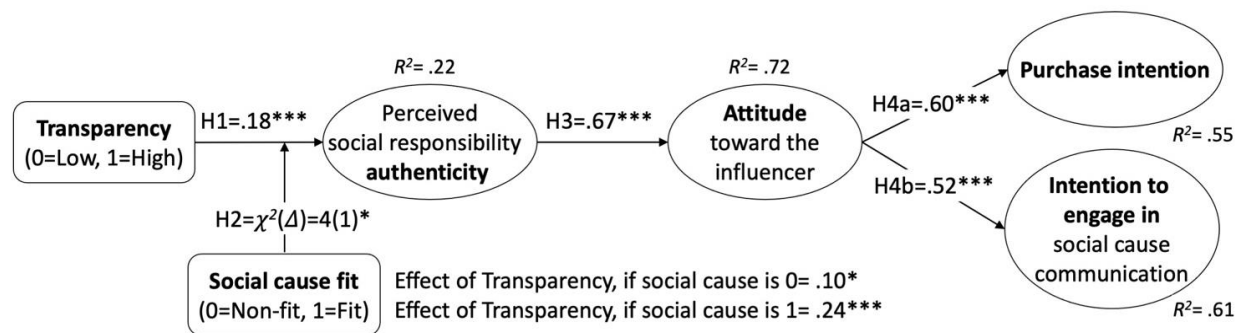
authenticity may positively influence consumers' attitude toward the influencer, which subsequently impacts their behavioral intentions (Pérez, 2019). Previous studies found that there are functionalistic (i.e., business-wide benefits, such as increased purchase intention) and constitutive (i.e., co-construction of socially responsible commitments between a company and stakeholders) CSR communication outcomes (Golob et al., 2013). As influencers are known as product and brand endorsers, as well as amplifiers of various voices and movements on social media, their social cause communication may have both functionalistic and constructive outcomes. Thus, this study investigates the influence of consumers' attitude toward an influencer on their intentions to 1) purchase a product that an influencer promotes in the future and 2) engage in social cause communication (see Figure 1).

**Methods.** A between-subjects, 2 (low vs. high transparency) x 2 (social cause non-fit vs. fit) experimental design was employed. A mock fashion influencer's social media postings were developed as stimuli. The participants were recruited by Amazon Mechanical Turk and were limited to U.S. Millennials and Gen Z older than 18 because those generational cohorts are not only the main social media users but also show greater interest in social issues than others (Kim & Austin, 2020). A pretest ( $N = 155$ ) was conducted using an online survey platform, Qualtrics, and it confirmed the successful manipulation of transparency and social cause fit in the stimuli.

Valid and reliable measurement items were adapted from previous studies (i.e., perceived authenticity: Alhouthi et al., 2016; attitude: Pérez, 2020; behavioral intentions: Bialkova & Te Paske, 2021), and those were measured with a 7-point Likert-type scale. Further, significant manipulations of transparency ( $M_{Low}(N = 391) = 4.62, S.D. = 1.48, M_{High}(N = 392) = 5.62, S.D. = .75, t(576.70) = -11.95, p < .001$ ) and social cause fit ( $M_{Low}(N = 401) = 4.85, S.D. = 1.72, M_{High}(N = 384) = 5.64, S.D. = .99, t(644.12) = -7.90, p < .001$ ) were confirmed.

**Results.** The results of confirmatory factor analysis indicated a good measurement model fit to the data:  $\chi^2(55) = 266.25, p < .001, CFI = .97, TLI = .96, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .02$ . Composite reliability values were .88 or greater, which confirmed the variables' reliabilities. Furthermore, factor loadings, average variance extracted values, and squared correlation coefficients confirmed convergent and discriminant validities.

A structural equation modeling with maximum likelihood estimation was conducted. The model had a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2(78) = 304.112, p < .001, CFI = .97, TLI = .97, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .02$ . As a result, H1, H3, and H4 were supported. A multi-group analysis was conducted to test the moderation effect of social cause fit. Both unconstrained and constrained models fit data very well, and a significant difference between their  $\chi^2$  values was confirmed, indicating a significant moderation effect of social cause fit. Thus, H2 was supported.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model

**Discussion and Conclusion.** This study laid the first stone to examine influencers' perceived social responsibility authenticity. Due to the nascency of this research topic, we defined the term and conducted the first deductive, empirical study that investigated its antecedent and outcome factors. Based on the functionalistic and constitutive outcomes, the study has implications for both influencers who want to be conducive to the greater good of society and businesses. First, influencers should be transparent and promote social causes aligning their domain of interests to be more effective, given the significant impact of these factors on perceived authenticity. Further, businesses may consider collaborating with such influencers as consumers tend to be skeptical toward CSR messages (Connors et al., 2017). Influencers who spontaneously discuss social causes may promote CSR products and campaigns more effectively than companies, evading cynical responses and increasing consumers' purchase intention and intention to engage in social causes. However, the small effect size of transparency suggests future research to examine additional antecedents that may have a stronger impact on perceived authenticity.

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